

MASTERLY STORIES OF AMERICAN RANCH LIFE:-

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It was a barren day. Great gusts of rain and fog swept in from the sea—sort of wet dust, as though Neptune were housecleaning, and peevish over the operation.

Before me stretched a pier. The most lonesome pier I ever saw. It was an aged and decrepit pier. Whenever infrequent passengers landed from fishing-boats they did a cancan from one solid spot to another. I cannot find words to describe the wretched loneliness of the structure; it looked as if it were the only thing in the world, surrounded by unhappy memories and a bleak wind. Still, it was a place to go, and I went.

And there, huddled against one of the rotting, swaying piles, I found the A. A. B. This degree confers upon the owner the privilege of smoking the worst tobacco known to man or pirate, and the power of free and untrammeled speech, for your A. A. B. is none other than the Ancient Able-Bodied—in other words, an antique deep-seafaring man.

I looked upon his old, old oilskins, the old, old sea-boots, and old, old patches of black hide that peeped here and there through whiskers adrift with rain, and I was almost at a loss for words. Then I said in the hailing sign of those who worship Nicotiana:

"Got a match?"

He eyed me with an old, old eye. That eye resembled a pale-blue oyster.

"Aye," quoth he, "I have." He did a thumb fingering in many vast pockets. Wonder grew upon his face, and concern.

"Split me fiddiehead!" says he. "What's acomin' of the dang thing? I had a one, that's sure." And again those thumb-fingers explored, like little bears.

"Ah," says he, "I got 'er now!"

He pulled a rubber tobacco pouch from his left hind pocket with his right front hand. From this pouch he took: first, a chamois sack, which he balanced carefully on his knee; then, fumbling in the deep, dark recesses of the pouch, he produced an old, old match. Once it had been a gay, young, red-headed thing, ready to brighten and sparkle at a friendly touch; but now it was a melancholy pink in hue—some of its phosphorus had melted down its side, the wood-work was gray with weathering.

"There ye be, skipper!" said he with a certain blitheness; "but hold your mooin' a minute, will 'ee, till I lay aboard a cargo."

From another pocket he extracted an old, old pipe, burned down at the side. From the pouch came out some old, old tobacco, which a stiff forefinger rammed like a cannon charge into the pipe. A bit of ashes to make the moist horror of the charge combustible followed.

"Git to le'ward, and strike 'er up!" says he. I lit my pipe and, being a handly man with a light from old range-riding days, I saved it, and stooped to put the fire to his bowl.

A vapor arose—I cannot call it smoke—it bore a greenish-yellow tint against the fog. I had to take a breath about that time—a man does occasionally—and I drew a whiff of that emanation into my lungs; the world reeled. Often I have smoked chewing tobacco mixed with coffee, tea, roast beans, red-willow bark, and other things, when need pressed on the prairie, but never did I imagine anything short of Pluto's realm held a flavor like that old, old pipe.

I choked, and the tears trickled down my face. Hastily I climbed to wind'ard. Meanwhile my old friend poisoned the air for yards around.

As he was replacing his plunder, he glanced at the chamois bag. From this he took a gold watch and held it up.

"Hey!" said I. "Lemme see!" He passed it over.

"She's soled," he explained; "soled gol'. Worth a pile o' money."

"What's the answer?" I asked him. He looked a trifle hurt.

"I tell 'ee," says he, and his voice rose and fell with the moaning cadence of the surf on a far-off shore, "s'pose you takes me up to the ho-hotel and buys me one little drink to sweeten m' b'gle? Then, mebbe, I can spin you the yarn about it. How's that strike you, skipper?"

"Let us go at once," I answered, and with an agility surprising, he put his feet beneath him and we went up that rickety and old, old pier.

We had a table, two drinks, and all the time there was between us. It was the usual barroom of a fishing resort, sanded floor, and so on.

After the drink disappeared I called loudly for cigars; they were bad—cabbage wrapper and sole-leather filler, but that pipe!

"My name," began the A. A. B., "is Willyum Thomkins—William L. Thomkins; but that don't matter." He held his cigar like a telescope, sailor fashion. "I was in Engerland,"

he continued, "just off'n a Briddish ship. I was sittin' on a dock precisely like that one out there, dreamin' and philosserfizin' regardin' life and thinks. How is it, I was thinkin', every time I get ashore with my pay burnin' a hole in my leg, I say I'll never go to sea agin? I'm tired of bein' cooped up on a heavin', tossin' craft, and I'm so blamed glad to get ashore, I has to celebrate. So that pay-day proceeds to keep company with lots more pay-days, and I'm breakin' and longin' for the heave of a good ship underfoot agin."

"These is in the day of wooden ships and iron men. You wouldn't believe what a man I was them days—well, shipmate, I ain't the kind to boast, or I could tell you sumpin'. Anyways, there warn't no upstairs nor down-cellars aboard ship them times. You was either on deck or below. And if you told the bucko at the wheel to please take the first turn to the left, he'd fly a belayin'-pin at you. There warn't no conversation 'bout right' and 'left.' That kinder talk takes all the gumption out of seafarin'. Fust you know this crew of young fellers that's doin' things now will be callin' St. Peter 'Pete' and askin' for the loan of a bit of chewin'. They ain't got proper respect for nothin'."

"Well, I warn't no sea-lawyer to be worritin' 'bout things; but I ain't et for three days, an' though I kept a haulin' up on my belt, my stomach conntinered to slack away like a moorin' cable on the turn of the tide; an' I didn't like that. Philosserfizin' don't fill an empty gizzard. Allover sudden I looks up, and here come a square-built female a bearin' down on me on a fair wind.

"Good mornin'" she says.

"Mornin' ma'am," says I, cautious. "My pay-day's three days gone; an'—"

"I hates to disturb you in your meddertashuns," says she, "but are you lookin' for a berth?"

"Yes, ma'am, I is," I says, wonderin' if this was some new kinder game for the benefit of the seafarin' person.

"Would you mind tellin' me your ratin'?" says she, very polite.

"Cook," says I.

"Ah, good," says she, a clappin' her hands; "just what I been huntin' for. An' you look like a nice man, too."

"Thanks, ma'am," says I, a blushin' an' bowin', "I thankee very kindly; but I ain't no land cook. I'm a sea cook, and a son of a sea cook."

"Of course," says she, airy, "I knowed that. My 'usban' is the master of that there bark, an' I'm a pickin' up a crew for him. I want on'y nice, God-fearin' men a sailin' with my 'usban'. I don't allow no liquor drinkers aboard ship. My 'usban' don't drink nothin' but cocoa himself. He's that fond of it be named the ship Cocoa. Foller me, and sign up," says she.

"An' away goes that lady skipper, me tow'lin' behind like a dingey, to where a three-masted bark is lyin' at her berth."

The skipper stood at the gangway as we went aboard, and when he sees us he tips his hat an' bows. I never see that done afore, so I tips my hat, an' I bows. When it come to bein' polite, I don't allow no Briddisher to blanket me.

"Whom 'ave we 'ere?" says the skipper.

"The new cook," says the lady, "that I just got for you!"

"And very much obliged," says the skipper, bowin' again, so I bows and the lady bows, and we was bobbin' around there like buoys in a channel till the skipper run out his fin and says: "How do, cook?"

"I wipes my hand on my breeches and shook hearty. "Fine, sir; fine!" I says, thinking to myself this is the politest old man I ever did see.

"Cook," says the skipper, you look to me to be as good a cook has never lay me lamps on."

"That ain't for me to admit, sir, beggin' your pardon," says I, thinkin' of that poor, foundered stummick of mine that was fairly clewed around my backbone. "But there's one thing I may say: when I'm paid to work, I get at it—where's the galley, sir?"

"Oh!" he answers, "I wouldn't think of makin' yo' turn to now. Take the rest of the ay ashore while you got the chanst."

"Cap'n," I says, "for me work comes fust, pleasure arterward," an' I starts for the galley smoke.

"All right, cookee," says he, "you're a willin' hand—go forrad and get busy."

"In about five minutes I hatter let two holes ou'n my belt. I swallered them biscuits whole. Three days fastin' will give you a mighty appy-tite."

"For the two weeks we laid in port I never see such a polite crew as was aboard that ship. Nothin' but bowin' an' beginn' pardon and excuse me an' ettyket. Even them 'prentice boys was took with the idee, and a plain seaman thanks me with tears in his

THE CRUISE OF THE COCOA

eyes for savin' him a plate of hash when he was late to mess account of havin' fell overboard.

The skipper's wife stuck a little Bible in each man's sea-bag, an' then they all got religion. All but Blue-nose. He didn't get it. He never got nothin'. He was an athyst. I up and ast him one day: "Does you b'lieve in anything?" Yes, says he, a drawlin' through that nose o' his, "I b'lieve in three meals a day, I does."

"Well, sir, when the crew warn't busy heavin' around they set readin'

nor the hull land but a place to get buried in!"

"Aw, give over!" says he. "You're Murrican, ain't you?"

"Sure am I!" I says. "Long may she wave!"

"All right," says he; "you speak of Murrican things an' I'll listen; but give me leave to know a plasted, bleddy, bloommin', beastly, bally, bloated, blighted Briddish bucko pirate when I sees 'im, will yur?"

"Well," says I, puffectly a-stound-ed, "you're what eddycated people calls a pessimist—you're wuss—

I recalls she looked a little pecooliar around the eyes but then I didn't seem to notice it.

"We heaved up bright and early and away we goes. Wind holdin' steady from nor-nor-east, and we a' comin' a bumpin' into the slack of the mizzen-to-gallantsail, then, kerswoop! bumpin' from mizzen-topails into the cro'-jack, and then on a pile of tarpaulins all right and handy-o! While the skipper sings out from the mizzen trucks, "Thar' yer blasted Yankee! That'll hold yer sass-box shut for a while, I hopes!"

sail yard, threw a leg over the main-skylights braces, and went down to the mizzen a sailin'.

"Just as I hit the mizzen-skylight the old man let such a roar out him it made me lose my grip, and down I come a bumpin' into the slack of the mizzen-to-gallantsail, then, kerswoop! bumpin' from mizzen-topails into the cro'-jack, and then on a pile of tarpaulins all right and handy-o! While the skipper sings out from the mizzen trucks, "Thar' yer blasted Yankee! That'll hold yer sass-box shut for a while, I hopes!"

"Barkkeeper, to the rescue!" I cried.

Two trusty schooners of beer successfully navigated the passage across the bar. With the foam on his lips, my friend resumed:

"Yus, we floated about in that ship's boat—well, I dunno how long; but it seemed like months and months. Every mornin', whilst Blue-nose held him, I fed the skipper a spoonful of dry cocoa. My soul! How he holered! How he said he'd do for me some time! But a prummis is a prummis. We wouldn't give him no more'n a teaspoonful of water, arter the cocoa, even at the fast, knowin' water wus goin' to become a verity with us slattin' aroun' in the ocean. An' Blue-nose, he kicked sonkin' that, but I got him to see reason. An' then the water give out altogether, an' the skipper had to take his cocoa dry. He got to prayin' again, but you don't ketch no Yankee seaman twice on the same hook. Pray or no pray, cuss or no cuss, beg or no beg—let him holler, rave, roar, ramp, or riot like he was minded to, he had to take his cocoa. Tord the last his mouth was that dry he couldn't swaller none but anyhow he had it there to swaller. I done my duty."

"What price a Briddish pirate now?" says Blue-nose, when I went by him. "You and your Christian gentleman!"

"Blue-nose," says I, "I was mistook in my man, an' I admits it, honest. But, I says, 'he drinks his cocoa every mornin' just the same.'

"Does he tho'?" says Blue-nose. "My eye! But you got the cheek to tell me that!"

"Well, I see salt spray was I in when a gent is chasin' his hat ashore. You know how it jus' rolls along under his finger-tips, an' stops when he stops and starts when he starts? Well, blast me figger-head! If we didn't chase the edge o' one o' them squalls a hour, with the skipper a rowin' to bust himself and Blue-nose stretchin' as far over the bows as his long arms an' his long legs would let him—one settin' on his feet—an' it just rained on the edge of the hat he held! That's all."

"Pull like we would, and stretch like an annycondy snake, we couldn't more'n wet the edge o' that hat. Whiles two foot furder away it was pourin' scuppern'—an' we with our tongues as dry as rope yarn an' stickin' out a foot!"

Again he paused. I distinctly heard a rattling in his throat. How potent a thing is memory! Why, even to me there came a time of three days in the Bad Lands with a hammering sun, and my throat shriveled to an aridity so great the barkeeper could scarcely hear my cry but that his ears were of uncommon acuteness.

"Thankee, kindly, sir!" exclaimed the Able-Bodied, as again he jipped the foam.

"Yes, sirree!" he continued—I thought I saw a change in his face—the past danger suddenly realized. His speech grew hasty, as taut nerves are wont to serve.

"We sailed an' we sailed, despairin' an' sad an' broken-hearted. There won't be no gol' watch for me! I thinks, 'nothin' but Davy Jones an' a locker with no number on it.' One night a mist come on the ocean. It covered all, an' that was the lonesomest, wuss thing you ever did see! You talk about bein' all alone! Why, there wasn't nothin' at all! Even Blue-nose an' the skipper didn't seem like they was real."

"Am I dead?" thinks I. "Am I a rovin' through purgatory?"

"When, all of a sudden, there come a flash of read light, a bump, an' a lad sings out dead ahead, 'What's the matter of you, fellers? Don't you know a dock when you see one? Drunk agin, or what now?'

"An' there we was, sir, right back agin to that same, identical dock we started from. We'd rowed a straight course to it, through a thousand mile o' ocean!"

"Next thing I knows the skipper's wife was whisperin' in my ear: 'Did he take his cocoa?'

"Every mornin', ma'am, regular," says I.

"Oh, werry good! So werry good!" says she. "Take this—" and she shoves the watch into my hands. "Good-by!"

The transition was so sharp I sat a moment stunned. The Able-Bodied was gone. I could not tell whether the last words were addressed to me or whether they formed part of the narrative.

The barkeeper volunteered.

"Seen his wife comin'—had to skip," said he.

"Remarkable story, that," I answered, to gain time.

The barkeeper grabbed at his counter for support.

"Say, where you from?" he gasped.

"I told him."

"Oh," said he, "that accounts for it. I wondered who was stringin' who."

"You don't believe that story?"

"There is a tone that renders words needless."

"Prentice boys on a hooker!" snorted the barkeeper. "My Mary Ann! Captain drinkin' cocoa! Glory be!"

"Who is the old cus, anyhow?" I cried in wrath.

"Him?" said the barkeeper. "Old Tom? Second deck-hand on a garbage scow all the days of his life. Fished a kid out of the drink with a boat-hook once, and the kid's old man gave him that watch. Come around another day and he'll tell you another story about it. Have a drink?"

I walked to the door and gazed upon the desolate scene. There lay the old, old dock, and there, scurrying along before an irate female person, nimble fled my old, old friend.

Gray was the day, and grayer my thoughts.

The hollowness of things bore sharply on me—with such an imminence and vehemence that I fled across the way and ordered one broiled steak, two plates of fried potatoes, one dozen raw oysters, and a pot of coffee. After all, I had a fine appetite.

I cannot tell you how engrossed I



"But a prummis is a prummis."

them there Bibles an' preachin' to each other. It was hard, o' course, to get anybody to listen, so mostwise they done the thing in dooties and treeos. An' the feller that hollered the loudest, he won.

"What beat me, though, was where was our cargo? We hadn't